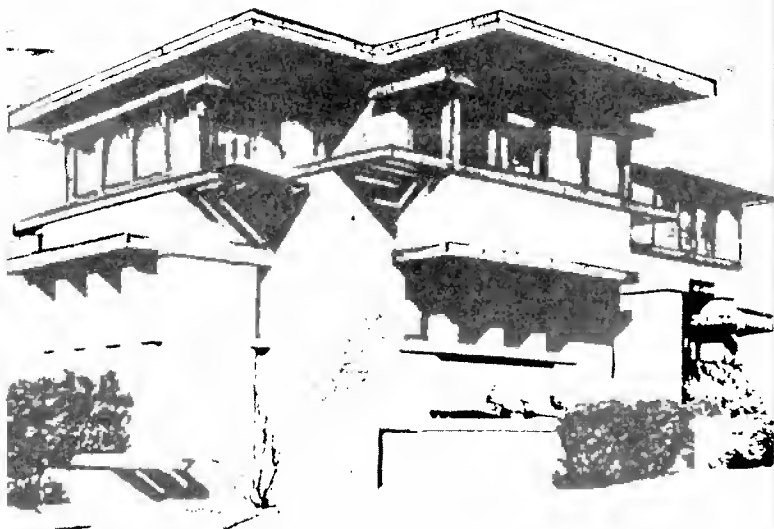


Office Copy

the EMIL BACH HOUSE

Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks



the
**EMIL BACH
HOUSE**

7415 North Sheridan Road

Frank Lloyd Wright, architect

Completed in 1915



(Barbara Crane, photographer)

Located on Sheridan Road, a street lined with high-rises, the Emil Bach house is fairly conspicuous. It is a small-scale, compact, rectangular building. Its dimensions, compared to those of the surrounding structures, draw attention to the house as does the "semi-cubist" design of the facade. The geometry of the facade is determined by the parallel lines, right angles, and dark contrasting trim, none of which is superficial but all of which delineates the underlying structure. As such, the Emil Bach house is a striking example of the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright.

Wright designed the house for Emil Bach in 1915. Emil and his brother Otto C. Bach, of the prominent Chicago family that owned the Bach Brick Company, both admired the work of Frank Lloyd Wright. In 1912, Otto had purchased the Oscar Steffens house at 7631 North Sheridan, a Wright-designed house built in 1909 (now demolished).

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Emil commissioned Wright to design his own home nearby on the lot at 7415 North Sheridan Road. This was one of Wright's last small urban commissions and is one of the few Frank Lloyd Wright houses in the city of Chicago.

Much of Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture can be found in the nearby suburbs of Oak Park, where Wright had his own studio and home until 1909, and in River Forest. The two towns contain thirty-one buildings designed by Wright. Many of these structures reveal the development of the style for which Wright became famous, Prairie architecture. Wright's work strongly influenced the development of modern residential architecture, generating a movement known as the Prairie school. Prairie school buildings are generally characterized by broadly projecting eaves, low roofs, powerful horizontal lines, and simple geometric shapes. Historical styles and traditional ornament were consciously rejected in favor of straightforward forms. The Prairie house was genuinely contemporary.

Frank Lloyd Wright's innovative theory of design grew out of the personal philosophy which he continued to develop throughout his life. As his concepts changed, so did his architecture. Yet all his buildings adhered to certain fundamentals. Unlike so many architects before him who designed buildings to set man apart from his surroundings, Wright preferred to see man and nature as a continuity. He saw himself, the architect, as abstracting nature's space for the use of man. To produce order and clarity in his designs, he adopted man's geometric principles. He strove to create spatial continuity between the geometrically defined interior volumes and the exterior. This concept is particularly evident in his Prairie houses where the dominant lines of the interior spaces are extended to the exterior, reflecting a desire to join man with the setting around him. Also involved in this theory is a reverence for landscape. According to architectural historian Vincent Scully, Wright "tried, though in abstract form, to echo the shapes of the landscape in which his buildings were set." Each building was uniquely designed to suit its environment.

A view of the Bach House from the north.
(Barbara Crane, photographer)



A photograph of Frank Lloyd Wright, taken by Jun Fujita.
(Courtesy of the Chicago Historical Society)

These concepts are manifested in the architecture of the Bach house. The design also represents a shift in the architect's philosophy. The subtle, stylistic variations exhibited in the Bach house are related to changes in several aspects of Wright's career. In Wright's life as well as in his architecture, the period between 1911 and 1915 was transitional. At this time, Wright was slowly drawing away from residential architecture. He no longer had as many commissions in the suburbs. His work more often involved larger projects, such as the Midway Gardens in Chicago and the A. D. German Warehouse in Wisconsin. He had begun work on one of his most notable commissions, the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo and in 1914, he went to Japan to supervise its construction.

The difference in the type of work Wright was involved with coincided with a change in his life style. In 1909, Wright had left his home and family in Oak Park and was joined on a European trip by the wife of one of his clients, Mamah Borthwick Cheney. Their alliance was part of Wright's self-avowed distance from tradition and society; he had become disenchanted with the restraints of conventional suburban life. In 1911, he built Taliesin, a country home in Wisconsin, and to there he and Mrs. Cheney retreated from society. He continued to work on architectural designs, but they were more compact than previously. The buildings were tightly organized and self-contained as if to insure privacy through limited community contact. They often had inconspicuous entrances and small windows, quite different from the openness of the earlier Prairie houses. The Bach house, which is extremely compact and closed, belongs to this post-Prairie school period.



This photograph of the Bach house was taken from the neighboring lot on the south and shows the main entrance to the house (center of photograph). Unlike most residential architects of the time whose designs included a welcoming frontal entranceway, Wright chose to locate the entrance on the side of the building where it is virtually hidden from Sheridan Road. A paved walkway leads from the street, up several short flights of steps, to the rear of the property where the pavement becomes a patio. The front door, which faces the rear of the property, is entered from this patio. The location of the doorway, so unapparent from Sheridan Road, is in keeping with Wright's concern for the privacy of inhabitants of urban residences. Similarly conceived, the small casement windows are somewhat concealed beneath broad overhangs.
(Barbara Crane, photographer)

Suitably designed for an interior lot, the shape of the Bach house strongly reflects its location. It is essentially a rectangle, forty-one by fifty-two feet overall. The living area on the first floor, facing Sheridan Road, and the porch to the rear project somewhat from the rectangle. The second floor projects beyond the exterior walls of the first floor. This spatial difference is reiterated by the use of tawny colored brick on the first floor and cream colored stucco on the overhanging areas. Dark brown wooden trim accents the projecting parts of the facade. This contrast produces the semi-cubist feeling of the design. Interestingly,

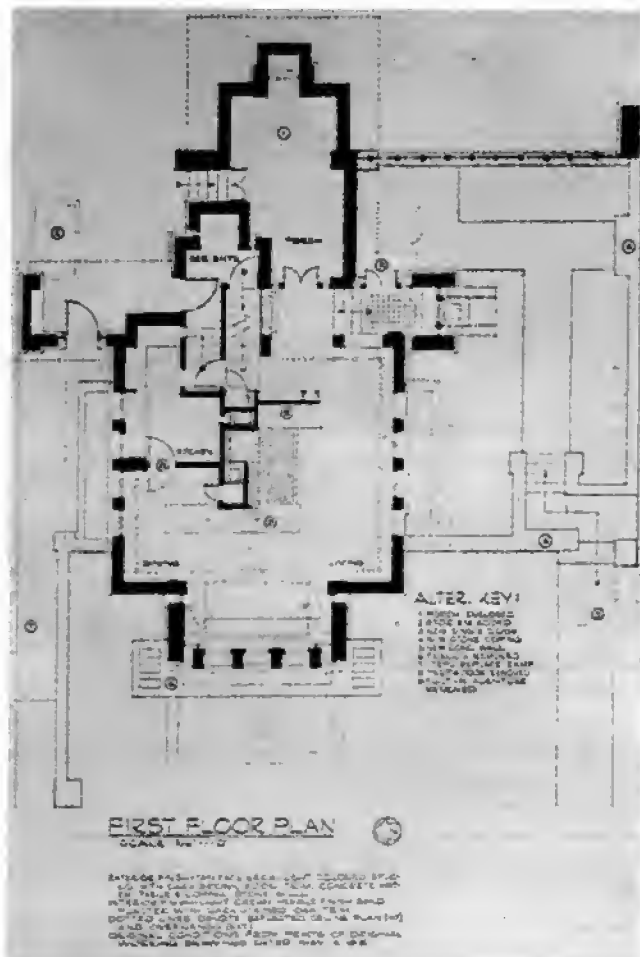
the lines repeat the dominant verticals and horizontals of the high-rises since built on Sheridan Road.

The main entrance is on the south side of the building, toward the rear of the house, reflecting Wright's predilection for designing inconspicuous entryways. The service entrance is on the north wall, also toward the rear. The windows, set under the overhangs, appear small and enclosed. These understated windows have a single glass pane while those on the second floor originally had leaded-glass designs. The lintels and sills of the windows are concrete, encasing them deeply in the wall.

The rooms of the first floor are arranged around a central area containing a fireplace and a staircase. The connecting living and dining rooms are located on the west end of the south side. To the northeast is a kitchen and large service entry. The central stairway leads to the second floor where originally there were four bedrooms and a bath. However, the southeast bedroom has been remodeled into a second bath. A wing, containing what was originally a porch with a sun terrace above, extends to the rear of the house. Now both the porch and the sun terrace are enclosed, increasing the living space of the house.

The interior is finished with a light cream pebble-and-sand plaster. Wright chose this interior color and named it "sunshine." All the wood trim and built-in furniture is of unstained black walnut. The doors also are walnut and are framed by simple trim complementing the simplicity of the rectangular moldings found throughout the house. Birch flooring of two-and-a-half-inch strips is used through most of the house; four-by-four-inch clay tiles cover the entry floor. Although the original light fixtures, designed by Wright, have been replaced, the other limited alterations made to the house have been done with total deference to the original design. In fact, many of the features and details have recently been restored.

A Historic American Buildings Survey drawing of the Bach house, showing the openness of the floor plan.



In the overall design of the Bach house, Wright handled the arrangement of space well. True to his developing emphasis on privacy, Wright oriented the design inward to shield the inhabitants from the community around them. Yet the interior spaces flow together and are conducive to family gatherings. This open floor plan makes good use of the available interior space. The living area is extended to the exterior of the house by the inclusion of a patio in the plan. The patio is situated toward the rear of the property, insuring privacy from the street. This arrangement reflects Wright's conviction that privacy was becoming increasingly important to urban dwellers.



The strong geometric lines of the interior trim, seen in these two photographs, complement the design of the facade. (Barbara Crane, photographer)





A view of the Bach House as it appears from Sheridan Road.
(Barbara Crane, photographer)

In the Bach house, the geometric shapes of the urban landscape are intensified by the rectangular quality of the design. Although this emphasis predominates, the Bach house is not a box. Wright strove to avoid this image in all his buildings, and he succeeded in the Bach house. In his own words, he "destroys the box" by breaking up the facade with a wide overhanging roof, cantilevered balconies, and the projecting west bay. These structural details produce a continuity between the interior of the house and its exterior as well as between the house itself and its surroundings. Wright was able to balance the urban setting with his architectural philosophy in a sensitive design well suited to its location.

The Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks was established in 1968 by city ordinance, and was given the responsibility of recommending to the City Council that specific landmarks be preserved and protected by law. The ordinance states that the Commission, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, can recommend any area, building, structure, work of art, or other object that has sufficient historical, community, or aesthetic value. Once the City Council acts on the Commission's recommendation and designates a Chicago Landmark, the ordinance provides for the preservation, protection, enhancement, rehabilitation, and perpetuation of that landmark. The Commission assists by carefully reviewing all applications for building permits pertaining to designated Chicago Landmarks. This insures that any proposed alteration does not detract from those qualities that caused the landmark to be designated.

The Commission makes its recommendations to the City Council only after extensive study. As part of this study, the Commission's staff prepare detailed documentation on each potential landmark. This public information brochure is a synopsis of various research materials compiled as part of the designation procedure.



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